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YOUNG ACTIVIST RETURNS TO HIS ROOTS

To engage the high schoolers in social justice advocacy, Davila compares and contrasts significant figures like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.

After four years away from home, Victor Davila returns to lead the advocacy program where he was mentored

Hunts Point activist Victor Davila is revitalizing activism at The Point Community Development Center.

As a community organizer, Davila's teaches his students to speak out against injustices through campaigning and the importance of non-violent protests.

In August Davila became the coordinator at "Activists Coming to Inform Our Neighborhood," or A.C.T.I.O.N. at The Point, where he teaches a new generation of young South Bronx activists three days a week.



Victor Davila at The Point fixes the positioning of a scarecrow at The Point CDC's Hunts Point Riverside Park campus. Photo: Ali McPherson

The Point is dedicated to youth development, culture and economic revitalization of Hunts Point.

To engage the high schoolers in social justice advocacy, Davila compares and contrasts significant figures like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. and their different approaches. Malcolm X expressed the anger of his community through rioting while as a man of faith, King was more gentle in his approach to black equality.

Despite the importance of the role, the coordinator position at A.C.T.I.O.N. had been open for about a year before Davila filled it. He plans to continue the work that was done in the past, of teaching students how to create effective campaigns but this time around, he wants students to know the historical context behind the advocacy work they do.

"Teens have been in every single point of cultural intersection in our history as a society," said Davila, 25 who finds that one of the biggest challenges is getting the students engaged. "I want to have kids leaving with a clearer space and a clearer understanding of what it means to be from here because it's what I owe the Bronx."

For Davila the route to coordinator wasn't direct. Between May and August of this year, Davila worked as Garden Coordinator at The Point before making the transition. Over the years he has worked as a bouncer, hazardous waste janitor at a hospital, prep cook, cashier and taught environmental ecology at the Boys and Girls Club while studying environmental science in Vermont.

However, after the departure of the previous coordinator a year ago A.C.T.I.O.N. went through a "temporary moment of chaos," according to Davila, who says there were a few people working to keep the program afloat during that time.

Davila heard about the open position while working as the Garden Coordinator and he jumped at the opportunity.

As the Garden Coordinator and A.C.T.I.O.N. alum, Davila had a history with The Point and its youth. He was a shoo-in for coordinator a job he's wanted since he was 13.

Davila attended The Point regularly since he was 12, it was where he felt at home. He was homeschooled due to neural difficulties including a speech impediment and Mild Dyslexia.

Davila described himself as "type wild, and type weird" and struggled with social awkwardness, but at The Point, he had a group of friends and felt accepted. He started taking piano lessons and art classes at The Point and was a part of A.C.T.I.O.N. for about 4 years during his teens.



Victor Davila, 25, teaches his class. Photo: Ali McPherson.

"I think what A.C.T.I.O.N. did to me was alleviated a lot of my wandering confusion and a lot of that kind of background nihilism that you experience growing up in a neighborhood like this," said Davila.

His passion for activism at such a young age even inspired his sister Maya Davila to join A.C.T.I.O.N. when she was 13.

"He teaches the importance of the environment, and he gives kids a safe space to learn. It's cool to see kids around him, who respect him and trust him, said his sister.

Since late October, Davila has been providing history lessons and hands-on training so his students have a clear idea of what they will be working on in the coming months.

"The first two months of this orientation for the A.C.T.I.O.N. we laid out is going to be training. They don't even touch the campaigns until they are fully trained on what it means to do community organizing," said Davila, on his students' first day back in October.

The top three campaigns Davila wants his students to focus on is climate justice advocacy, rezoning/anti-gentrification action and voters rights.

"Every time we do advocacy work, we want to stamp a label on it, said Davila.

"I've seen A.C.T.I.O.N when it was not the best and I've seen it at its best. I believe it is going into a very bright future with Victor as our coordinator," said Sierra Straker, 16, who has been part of A.C.T.I.O.N. and The Point for two years.

A.J. Dixon, 17, who is currently a student in the A.C.T.I.O.N. program, looks up to Davila as a mentor.

"I think he's a very powerful speaker. There's a certain cadence and a certain articulation that he has. It's a very captivating thing," said Dixon.

The students are currently in a transition period where they are exiting the training portion of the course and starting to focus on the campaigns. Dixon said over the next month or so Davila and his students will be holding voter registration drives, to encourage Bronxites to go out and vote.

"The Point is the way it is because the Bronx is instrumental to it. This is the place where the Bronx bleeds into. It is not the heart that makes it pump, but definitely an important vein in the system," said Davila.